[19] CHAPTER 3

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

I. Natural Regions

131 The Bambara live in a region stretching between the 11th and 14th degrees of latitude north and between the 7th and 11th degrees of longitude west. They are grouped around the upper Senegal and upper Niger in the zone of basins bordered on the south by the Fouta-Djallon and the Guinea Ridge. The land is divided into several natural regions.

A. The Upper Niger

133 135 Framed by the outer ranges of the Fouta-Djallon and the cliffs of the Manding plateau, witness of the Pre-Cambrian shelf, the region is essentially schistose, with small veins of quartz and chimneys of dolerite; there are large intrusions of granite to the north 50 kilometers from Bamako, to the northwest and north of Siguiri, and to the south at the approach to the massif of the Fouta-Djallon. All the region is rich in gold. Several centers have long been exploited 316 by the natives by means of a network of narrow shafts which reach down to the auriferous seam. The whole region is encrusted with a shell of iron.

133 The region of the upper Niger is an immense plain covered with mammilliform hills. The plain rises gradually from the pass of Bamako to the mountains of the south, broken only by occasional dikes, such as that of Kouroussa-Kankan. The overall relief is very simple and monotonous; the local relief is very animated and varied because of the network of valleys hemmed in by steep cliffs 10 to 12 meters high.

The Niger, fed by the Tinkisso, the Milo, the Fié and, the Sankarani, reaches Bamako with a width of about 900 meters. It flows through a plain three to four kilometers wide in a southwest-northeast direction up to Timbuktu. It undergoes an annual rise which depends solely on the amount of rainfall. From Kouroussa to 132 Bamako the first rains at the end of April, and then of May and June, begin to feed the river; the flood period begins in June. At the time

b. Organization of Work

241 621 Work on the land is the only kind of work suitable for free men, for to work the land is to purify it. All agricultural operations [622 are set in motion by the dugu-tigi and are regulated by the fa who 515 assigns tasks by age classes. Each member of the community must work for it every day, except Monday and Thursday, from dawn to about 4:30 p.m. He may be helped, or even replaced, by his children and his captives. The rest of the time he may work for himself in his personal field or in the little fields situated along the water courses and the rivers, which are not periodically redistributed and are considered almost as personal and hereditary property. The fruit of this labor constitutes the personal savings of the community member.

316 423 The exploitation of the subsoil is governed by other rules which we still know only imperfectly. Like the soil, the subsoil belongs to the master of the land. Iron ore was extracted solely by the [324 blacksmith who paid the master of the land a rent in the form of hoes or axes. To exploit the gold mines, thousands of natives went in family groups to the placers at the beginning of the dry season. [63] The location of the placers was determined by the priests and changed every year. The men dig multiple small holes very close to each other, which may go very deep depending on the depth of the barren layer. When the calabashes of gold-bearing earth are brought up, the women wash the earth. The placers are abandoned at the beginning of the rains after three or four months of exploitation. Before the French occupation, gold was the exclusive property of the Fama and could in no case be the object of commerce. To- [439 day, gold is generally sold at the placers to Syrian, native, or European merchants, who have established veritable shops at the mining centers, shops which contain everything necessary for the miner's life.

463 554 The exercise of a profession other than the cultivation of the land is reserved to artisans who are accorded the insulting name of nyaman-kala, for only work on the land is noble work. These artisans form separate families in every Sudanese society, which has caused Europeans to call them, improperly, people of caste. They are divided into independent guilds.